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International wildlife group comes to the Yukon

by Sarah Locke

For more than a century the Wildlife Conservation Society, North America's oldest wildlife conservation group, has worked to save wildlife in some of the most remote parts of the globe. Its biologists have studied panda bears in China, snow leopards in the Himalayas, jaguars in Belize and a wide array of other species.

Now this venerable organization is starting to focus more on Canadian wildlife and wild lands, and one of its first projects in this country is based in the Taku River watershed in northern British Columbia. In the summer of 2004, Don Reid left his job as a government biologist in Smithers, B.C., and moved to Whitehorse to work for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

One of the Wildlife Conservation Society's first Canadian projects is in the Taku River watershed in northern British Columbia.
(photo: Don Reid)

The Taku River Tlingit First Nation has claimed about ten million acres of land in the Taku River watershed, an ecosystem which still has one of the healthiest runs of salmon on the Pacific Coast. Plans for reopening a mine and building a mining access road in the watershed have raised concerns about the future of the area. Reid is working with the First Nation to strengthen its ability to manage resources in its traditional territory.

Originally created as the New York Zoological Society in 1895, WCS has its headquarters at the Bronx Zoo. The group carried out the first survey of Alaskan wildlife in 1897 and helped save bison from extinction through a captive breeding program in the American West. But for the last century much of its work has been in Africa and Asia, where needs were seen to be most urgent.

WCS kicked its North American program back into gear about a decade ago, mainly because of concerns that funding cutbacks were preventing government agencies from adequately protecting wildlife. Responding to the increasing rate of development in the North, in 2005 WCS opened a Canadian head office in Toronto.

"It is exciting to be here as there has not been a lot of development here so far, and

conceivably conservation and development could be done well," says Reid.

He emphasizes that the WCS approach is all about cooperation, and in Canada the emphasis will be on building partnerships with First Nations, and helping them figure out where they need more expertise and how they can get it.

"As First Nations increasingly gain authority over their lands, there is an opportunity for them to get more involved in wildlife management issues, and it is increasingly evident that they do not always have the resources to do that. So we saw opportunities to help First Nations bolster their capacity," he says.

"You will not get very far with conservation unless you engage the local people, and empower the people who really count," he adds.

The Taku River Tlingit already have a Lands and Resources group, and a Fisheries program. Reid is working with them to assess the feasibility of a wildlife conservation department which would have the technical expertise for jobs such as monitoring wildlife populations. If they decide to proceed, he would help raise the money to fund the program.

"There is no wildlife person on staff, so the TRT and I have identified some short term needs such as upgrading their Geographic Information Systems (GIS) capability and skill level, and also digitizing as much of the traditional knowledge on wildlife and cultural sites as possible. When the information is digitized in GIS systems, then it can be better used for land use planning and treaty negotiations," he says.

"The community comes together around wildlife and fish, and that will be as strong a catalyst as anything for recruiting people to the government."

In Canada, the WCS also has biologists working in Crowsnest Pass on the Alberta/British Columbia border, Nahanni National Park Reserve, and in northern Ontario. Reid says he will no doubt be working on Yukon projects as well in the future. "WCS intends to make a long term investment here. There is no intention for me to be here for only a few years."

He hopes to take part in some of the initiatives that are already being developed, such as the federal government's work on a modeling approach to northern ecosystem management which could help communities agree on how much development they want to allow.

"It is an attempt to build a cumulative effects model that will uncover thresholds at which development produces undesirable ecological and social effects. Then people can agree when enough is enough. It asks scientists and communities to make that determination. Historically these decisions have been made in isolation, on a project by project basis that does not address cumulative effects."

"In the Yukon right now we have to be wary that we do not sit back on recent history and say we are doing alright. If we are honest with ourselves, and recognize that development is around the corner, then we need to build some tools and inform ourselves on how much development we are willing to take so that we do not open

the doors willy-nilly."

For more information on the WCS, visit www.wcs.org or contact Don Reid at dreid@wcs.org.